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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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THE FARM LABOR SITUATION
IN THE MIDWEST

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Report C-2

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THE FARM LABOR SITUATION
IN THE MIDWESTSummary and Implications

Young farm operators, farmers' sons and hired men lost to the draft and to industry constitute a serious menace to farm production for 1943. The loss of this younger group will seriously affect farm production. Farmers feel that it would be more advisable to defer farm boys rather than to draft unskilled labor for farm work.

The chief objections to the suggested use of young boys, older men and WPA are (1) incompetence and (2) risk of placing valuable productive mechanized equipment in the hands of inexperienced operators. There is also some fear of damage suits that could be brought by laborers who might easily injure themselves while operating machines unfamiliar to them.

Largely because of incompetence and unwillingness to work the long hours required of farm workers, there is condemnation of help secured through the U.S.E.S. About one-third of the farmers visited had not needed any help; almost as many had not had trouble getting help. Only 11 percent had tried to get help at the U.S.E.S.

Although the farmer compares his position with industries that are producing war materials, few have considered it necessary to train unskilled help as industry is doing. A suggested course of action would be to impress upon farmers that a part of their production job is to train needed help or to assist them in this job by undertaking a program of training farm labor. Since farmers are not operating on a cost-plus basis as are many war industries, it might be necessary to provide funds for such training and for transportation of laborers.

Farm wages have not increased as much as farm income. Although farm income has hit a new high, farmers seem to be reluctant to give up a proportionate part of that income to labor. They tend to have in mind a fixed level above which farm wages ought not to go.

The trend of paying for farm labor since the last war has been from wages by the month toward wages by the day and more recently by the hour.

Introduction

The extent to which farmers today rely on labor is shown very strikingly in reports from visits with 409 farmers between August 8 and September 24, 1942, in 16 Counties covering 11 states. McPherson and Nemaha Counties, Kansas; Johnson County, Nebraska; Fayette and Muskingum Counties, Ohio; Faribault and Yellow Medicine Counties, Minnesota; Lawrence, Fayette and Cass Counties, Indiana; Dade County, Missouri; Decatur County, Iowa; Barren County, Kentucky; Spink County, South Dakota; Effingham County, Illinois; and Trempealeau County, Wisconsin.

Interviews were conducted primarily in the area outside of the highly specialized dairy area. Only one of the counties visited was located in the intensive dairy area. Because of the variety of competing farm enterprises - hogs, beef cattle, sheep, poultry and wheat - this area offers a wide choice of outlets for productive energy. However, all of the farmers visited engaged in dairying to some extent.

The findings with respect to labor, with which the present report is concerned, were incidental to a study conducted to discover the things bothering farmers as they planned their 1943 dairy production.

THE FARM LABOR SITUATION
IN THE MIDWEST

The Loss of Help
Has Seriously Affected Some Farmers

The three percent of the farmers interviewed who had lost their help during the past year have reduced the number of cows being milked by 42 percent (Table 1).

Farm operators and farmers' sons drafted into the armed forces and lost to industry compose the age groups most affecting farm production. The same factors are accounting for a change in the quality of labor hired. Even though labor numbers employed on farms this present year may have been as high as the previous year, the quality of this labor has been lowered, as is pointed out throughout this report.

With the exception of Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, which is located in the intensive dairy area, the average size of dairy herd on the farms covered in this study was 7.7 cows. In contrast, the herds in Trempealeau County averaged slightly over 19 cows. Thus, most of the farmers visited in this study are operating family-sized farms and are not as concerned with the problem of hired help as farmers in the intensive dairy area.

It would be well to keep in mind while reading this report that the intensive dairy areas of the country parallel the industrial areas and consequently must compete more actively with industry for labor than the fringe area studied in this survey.

One-third of the farmers interviewed indicated having had trouble getting necessary help. An equal number have been able to get what help they have needed this year without trouble. The balance had not tried to get help, indicating their ability to operate without help (Table 2).

When asked about wages, only an eighth of the farmers mentioned wages by the month, whereas three-fourths were interested largely in day help. It is significant that many farmers today think of wages in terms of price per hour as this Fayette County, Indiana farmer expresses it: "I had to pay fifty cents an hour and the minute six o'clock comes they quit".

Many of these farmers are operating family-sized farms on which they can do the regular work themselves or with the help of the family; consequently, they need to hire extra day help only for peak periods.

In the minds of many farmers help is not available and they have resigned themselves to the fact that they must get along without help and operate their farms as best they can. This Cass County, Indiana, farmer operating a 240-acre farm with the aid of a twenty-two-year-old son expresses the plight of many:

"If my boy's taken I'll have to cut down on cows. We are managing okay now, but help is out of the question."

Competition by Industry

Some mention is made about industrial wages being so high that farmers cannot compete. There is little condemnation of labor for going to industrial work in view of the high wages paid, but much concern voiced over the short-sighted policy of the Government in allowing such high industrial wages which endanger production of needed foods by drawing the skilled help away from the farms. This young Indiana farmer operating a 160-acre stock farm fully describes the farm labor situation as it affects the farmer of today:

"I can go on the streets in town and usually get what help I need. It was a little harder to do this year though, for the defense plants in town are taking all the help. That is the biggest mistake the Government is making. They are paying men working in defense plants extremely high wages, so high that the farmer can't possibly compete with them and yet food is just as important as other materials in winning the war.

"The Government should either be paying a lower wage level or else pay farmers prices so that they can pay equally high wages. The high defense wages are pulling all the well-trained and intelligent help to the factory and the farmer can't use any help but those who are well trained nowadays. Any dumb fellow can do much of the factory work, but we can't use such help on the farm any more. Yet these high factory wages are leaving only the dumb ones for us."

The Labor Supply

High cost of labor, which in the mind of some farmers is prohibitive, is one of their main complaints. However, this, coupled with the inability to get help at a price which they can pay, is the major cause for having to reduce production (Table 3). Table 3 indicates how seriously the shortage of farm labor is affecting farm production.

Some of these farmers had made use of boys and older men and some had tried using men from WPA. But the use of such help does not, in the farmer's mind, make for safe or good farming practice. It is only an alternative, but in many cases he would rather do without help than to take such risk. A Middle-Western farmer states:

"Yes, I applied at the Employment Office for help and told them that I couldn't use anyone who drank or worked on 'Pa' and he had to be a high school graduate and they said to me: 'Mister, you have come to the wrong office.'

"But I can't afford to put unskilled help on high priced machinery or put unskilled help at many of the jobs which are risky, for a man might get hurt working and it could cost you your farm before you were through with it. A farmer had better do what he can alone and let the rest go than to take such risks."

In reply to the question, "Have you tried the U.S. Employment Service," over one-third of the farmers had had no trouble in getting help or else had not needed help. Nearly one-half had not tried to get help through the U.S.E.S., whereas 11 percent had used the U.S.E.S. Of the latter group, 3 percent did not indicate whether their contact with the U.S.E.S. had been satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Only 1 percent had satisfactory results when they tried to get help, as this Faribault, Minnesota farmer mentions:

"We obtained this man at U.S.E.S. and he is O.K. for some phases of farm work. Paid 50 cents an hour. Maybe more in 1943."

Two percent, however, could not obtain help through the U.S.E.S. as indicated by this middle-aged Fayette County, Ohio farmer:

"I have tried the U.S.E.S. but all they had was a bunch of old men who wanted a place to stay and work. They didn't have any men listed that I could use out here. We are fixing up the house on the other place so we can use some of those men."

Five percent had tried the U.S.E.S. and received unsatisfactory help. This farmer from Cass County, Indiana says:

"Yes, I have tried the U.S.E.S., but most of those fellows started out with WPA and that spoiled them. They want to take it easy while they work."

It is rather significant, in view of the fact that less than one-third of the counties have U.S.E.S. offices, that only 7 percent of those interviewed did not know about U.S.E.S. (Table 4).

When asked what should be done to provide more farm labor, one-third believed that more farmers and farm boys should be given

A P P E N D I X

I. Economic Outlook

1. How is 1943 looking to you? Do you feel that you are better off or worse off than in _____?
2. How about the dairy end of your farming? Is it more or less profitable than it was a year ago? How do you account for that?
3. How do you feel about the present price of (dairy products)?
4. Do you look for any change in this price, either up or down? Why do you expect such a change?
5. Do you have more milk cows or less milk cows _____ year ago? What was your reason for increasing (or decreasing)?
6. How are your cows doing this year as compared to _____? How do you account for that?
7. Did you feed your cows better this past year than _____ year before?

II. Intentions

8. Compared with this year, how heavily do you expect to _____ next year, - more, less, or about the same? Why?
9. What changes are you planning to make in your dairy operation for 1943?
10. (If no reference to number of cows) Are you planning to change in the number of cows you will milk? (If change is indicated) Why are you planning to make this change?
11. What are you planning to do with your next crop of heifer calves? (Raise them for cows, raise them for beef, etc.) Is this what you usually do with your heifer calves? (If change is indicated) Why are you changing?

III. General Comments

12. If you were to increase production in any of your farm livestock, what would it be in? Why would you increase _____?

* The interview schedule is that known as Study A-1. This report is concerned chiefly with questions 15-20.

13. Are you planning shift in livestock production? If so, are you making this shift?
14. Are you planning any changes in crop acreages? Why are you making this change?

15. Financial Position

1. What are the main things you will have to take into account in planning your next year's milk production?
2. How is the amount of help you think you will have affecting the number of cows you plan to milk?
3. Have you had trouble getting enough help?
4. (if yes) Have you tried the U. S. Employment Service?
5. How much do you feel you would have to pay to hire help?
6. What do you think should be done to provide more farm labor?
7. How do you feel supply for this season going to affect the number of cows you plan to milk?
8. How is the amount of equipment you have or expect to have going to affect the number of cows you expect to milk? (All kinds of equipment, but be sure to include consideration of discards, dairy equipment, etc.)

16. Marketing Milk

And one is sale of your milk or cream after it leaves your farm. Have you made any change in the past six months in the way of marketing your milk?

1. Are you thinking on making any change in the way you market your milk?
2. Have you sold any of your dairy herd in the past few months? (If yes) For what reason did you sell them?
3. How would they be? (Were they sold for slaughter, for production, to the community or county, or for production elsewhere?)

17. Other Factors

1. How are price changes affecting the price of agricultural products?
2. How do you feel the price of milk?

Number of coins
Number of coins

Number of coins (reference to number of coins)
Number of coins (reference to number of coins)

Number of coins (reference to number of coins)

Number of coins (reference to number of coins)	416
Number of coins (reference to number of coins)	34
Number of coins (reference to number of coins)	21
Number of coins (reference to number of coins)	4
	100%

Number of coins (reference to number of coins)

Table 4. Use Made of the U. S. Employment Service *

Use Made of U. S. Employment Service	
Has had no trouble or has not tried to get help	38%
Has not tried the U. S. Employment Service	35 }
Has not tried the U. S. Employment Service, does not believe they could help	10 } 46%
Has tried the U. S. Employment Service	3 }
Has tried the U. S. Employment Service, with satisfactory results	1 }
Has tried the U. S. Employment Service; could not supply help	2 } 11%
Has tried the U. S. Employment Service; received unsatisfactory help	5 }
Does not know of the U. S. Employment Service	7
Not ascertainable	1
	100%
	N=393 **

* Question 13: "Have you tried the U. S. Employment Service?"

** Sixteen cases not included because question was not asked.

Table 5. Suggestions for Providing More Farm Labor *

Suggestions	
Defer farmwork and farm boys	34%
Draft or urged labor to go to farms	6)
Lower industrial wages	3)
Exchange help	7) 25%
Use city people, children, older persons, NPA, etc.	9)
Does not know what can be done	38
Not ascertainable	<u>3</u>
	100%

N=389 **

* Question 20: "What do you think should be done to provide more farm labor?"

** Twenty cases not included because question was not asked.

